

**Lent 2 2019**

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March 17, 2019  
Narrative Lectionary

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Psalms 32:1-5  
Matthew 20:1-16

## IT'S ALL ABOUT GOD'S GRACE

We have such a hard time understanding that. It's all about God's grace. It's the same lesson that God has been teaching, and doing, and dying for, for longer than we can remember, but we still have a hard time with it. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness didn't get it. Paul, the author of much of the New Testament, didn't get it. Even the 12 disciples, who lived and walked with Jesus Christ, didn't get it.

God's welcome, affirmation, invitation, love, forgiveness, acceptance cannot be measured like an hourly wage or salary. It cannot be evaluated based on our capability, education, good looks or personality. And when we seriously think about that, it's a shocking and unsettling revelation, but also liberating.

Matthew tells us of a story, a parable, from Jesus. Firstly, a note on what a "parable" is. It's not a factually true account. It's not historical or literal. It's a story that hooks us in in such a way that we think we know where it's going, but then there's a surprising twist. The point is to hold a mirror up to ourselves with the goal of revealing something to which we've become blind or biased.

In this case, to set the context a bit, the big question raised just before this, was how to achieve eternal life. A rich, young ruler asked the question and bragged about how wonderful he was at keeping all of the commandments. But when Jesus challenged him to go one step further he wouldn't do it. Jesus sent him away.

This surprised the disciples. They had grown up and been taught the same principles – keep the commandments and all will be well. When Jesus sends the man away, they become concerned asking, "*who then can be saved?*" (Mtt 19:25) Peter even gets angry asking, "*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*" (v. 27)

The answer then comes in the vineyard parable as we heard.

I can't imagine that this helped Peter's shock. It must have been very unsettling to the disciples to hear that their investment of time and money

and talent would make no difference in terms of them getting a future reward. It seemed Jesus was saying that it didn't matter how much (or little) you gave up, or donated, or followed the Laws, you would still get a reward!

We hear the same story with similar response. It violates our sense of justice and fairness. It doesn't make sense to pay everyone the same; "it's the principle of the matter!" we claim. It's just not the way things are done. Like Peter, something inside of us rejects this carelessness; we're all for generosity, but it ought to be fair.

This story also catches us, because we have worked hard. We've been to school, we've invested and saved, we've driven our kids to dance and hockey games across the country, looked after aging parents. Some of us have tithed, cleaned the bathrooms, baked bread for communion and cut the grass. Some of us worked countless hours on committees, as delegates to meetings and conventions or teaching Sunday School. However, if we begin to value God's generosity based on our own imagined merit, then we are asking the same question as Peter, "*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*"

And that is where the challenge comes for us. Most of us will hear what we imagine to be injustice in this story, as if we've been cheated out of something we deserve. Which is very telling that we view it through a lens of privilege.

But this, like every story from the gospels is supposed to be good news. So imagine with me, if you were the last to be hired, if you were persecuted, had grown up in a place or situation with no opportunity for education, health care, or a stable home, if you happened to be born in a war torn country, where girls couldn't go to school or young boys were taught how to use machine guns, if you only ever heard racial slurs or judgement, if you were not lucky enough to be beautiful or fit or smart, if you were not hired at the beginning of the day, or the middle, and you were filled with worry (again) about how you were to support your family – then this story would be fantastic news! It would be so awesome that you would go home and tell your family and your village. You'd be excited to get up tomorrow and be ready to work again. You'd be proud that for one day, you provided enough. You'd know that God is good, rather than unfair.

So, this isn't a story about a new system of salary and benefits. It's not a best-practices-for-business story. It's really not even a story about us, even though it does reveal a lot about how we think. It's about God. And here's what we learn:

Firstly, if the first become last and the last become first, then the last become first... who are then moved to last... argh! So confusing! What this actually means is - *there is no hierarchy at all*. For God there no one more deserving than another.

You cannot earn your way, or buy it, or dress for it. You cannot invest for it, or sell everything in exchange for it. You cannot work for it. It doesn't matter if you come every Sunday to church or have come for the first time today; if you have a well-cared for home or no home at all, it makes no difference whether you are respectfully employed or can't hold a job. It makes no difference whether you have never had a drink touch your lips or can't be straight for a day. It makes no difference if you're heterosexual or gay, if you snort cocaine or Channel No. 5.

Who we are or how hard e work makes no difference because of grace.

Secondly, the parable teaches us that God is with us now – we need not wait for some future where all will be made well. God isn't holding out on us with a big surprize only at the end, as if life is one big entrance exam in preparation for heaven. The point of following Christ isn't to get somewhere, but to be here, now. Care for the people around you, speak up for the voiceless, tend Creation, live as the Spirit leads.

The Kingdom of God is here. Love is here. Acceptance is here – no one has to wait for it, no one has to earn it. It's free. Which means this is good news for all: and if you think about it, that's not injustice, it's not unfair, it's liberating.

Faith is not a transaction, because we cannot measure or quantify the infinite love of God. Amen.